

Testimony of the Quince Orchard Cluster before the Board of Education of Montgomery County Public Schools

January 12, 2011

President Barclay, members of the Board, my name is Kevin Farragher and on behalf of Quince Orchard Cluster, thank you for your service to our schools. Your care and concern are appreciated, as is your willingness to listen to your constituents on a cold night in these difficult times.

We from QO present ourselves to you as an apt microcosm of MCPS. Our cluster is possessed of much the same ethnic, religious, economic, academic, artistic and athletic diversity as the county as a whole. This representative mix thus comes before you this evening deeply disquieted over circumstances relating to the funding of our schools.

Our trepidation is summed up in a feature story appearing in last March's Atlantic Magazine. Entitled "How a New Jobless Era Will Transform America," this article reports on a Yale University study demonstrating how life chances are permanently diminished by the effects of economic downturn. Starting incomes fall by up to twenty-five percent for those educated or entering the workforce during significant recessions. This earnings gap persists, moreover, throughout the course of one's career so that individuals thus affected typically end up earn hundreds of thousands of dollars less across a lifetime than like-type workers educated and/or entering the workforce in more bountiful times.

Elsewhere, research indicates that causal factors for this gap reside in the amount of individualized instruction a child receives in his or her formative years. Generally speaking, current MCPS guidelines set class sizes at 22 students per classroom for all day kindergarten, 23 students per classroom for elementary school and 25 students per classroom for middle and secondary schools. Each additional seat in a class consequently robs a student of four to five percent of his or her teacher's daily attention. By extension, each additional seat is thereby dilutive of four to five percent of each student's ongoing focus, initiative and intellectual curiosity.

We must not allow such educational and societal dry rot to fester in an already adulterated MCPS budget. We must not succumb, moreover, to the arguments of budget hawks who are quick to call for the elimination of positions labeled "Reading Specialist" or "Para-Educator," yet who lack the foresight to quantify over the longer-term the cost to the county of implementing a policy of fiscal neglect relative to the funding our public schools.

We realize the enormity of our appeal to you this evening: insulate MCPS from the effects of recession. Sadly, we do not have a Swiss bank account to offer as assistance. Rather, our input is confined to a handful of common sense recommendations pertaining to the quality of our children's ongoing education.

The first of these is dreadfully obvious. The County Council must be lobbied and made to understand that Maintenance of Effort goes without saying. Objection to the Maintenance of Effort provision is analogous to funding a fire department to a level just below the threshold necessary to qualify for access to water. In hard times such as these, the mere thought of foregoing additional state funding is indefensible.

Our second recommendation is maintenance, to the extent possible, of class sizes as presently composed. This necessarily includes maintenance of classroom support staff in order to minimize disruptions arising from those most academically at risk; those most in need of and impatient for individualized attention. Any society is only as strong as its weakest members, and this is especially so as it relates to a school. The distraction of those most academically at risk will result, if unchecked, in the distraction of the most academically gifted and then our problems become far greater than any balance sheet can measure.

Having made the case for minimizing increases in student-teacher ratios, we suggest drastic reductions in the administrative apparatus of MCPS as a possible means of funding. After all, a glance at page 9 of the FY 2012 Operating Budget Brief discloses five degrees of separation of separation between high school principals and the Superintendent. Additionally, of the 21 organizational boxes displayed on the page, only one makes reference to the schools themselves. These structures and the efforts they represent may well have generated value in times more flush; however, given the needs of the present, we can no longer afford for education delivery in Montgomery County to be an academic exercise. Monies allocated to MCPS must first, last and foremost find their way into the classrooms.

Quince Orchard Cluster does not envy you your role as arbiters in the debate that is shaping. However, if you put yourselves in the way of further budget renderings that would lead to unacceptable student-to-counselor and student-to-teacher and resource teacher ratios, we and the rest of the citizenry will join you, as we have in the past, in continuing to make Montgomery County Public Schools the brightest present manifestation of Montgomery County's future. Thank you.